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ABSTRACT

The idea of using the informal reading inventory (IRI) as a diagnostic instrument for placing children in their basal texts is a sound one. Traditional IRI's, however, based on random selection of passages from texts, tend to give inaccurate placements for children. This happens because the text pages do not always contain enough new words to sample the child's ability to handle that grade level's vocabulary. Therefore, a new method of devising an IRI is suggested in which new words are taken from the text and incorporated into an original paragraph. To discover the usefulness of this procedure, a traditional IRI and one based on the new method were administered to 10 second graders and 10 fourth graders. The Gray Oral Reading Test was also given. The results indicated that the new IRI (1) presented fewer total number of words per selection, with more new words in each; (2) required fewer selections to be read; and (3) gave an instructional-level score in 10 cases lower than the traditional IRI. Both inventories gave lower instructional scores than did the Gray Oral Reading Test. The issue that still remains for further investigation is the accuracy of placement. Tables and references are included. (Author/DH)

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"AN INFORMAL READING INVENTORY - A NEW APPROACH"

In an article by Park and Linden (3) we read about the great percentage of children failing in reading - according to grade level expectations. This fact is astounding and disgusting. Why are these children failing? If they are all given their grade level reader it is no wonder - but who are we to impose the grade level norm upon all children? If they were given material equal to their instructional level, we would not read about so many failures, for children would be succeeding at their level.

Wouldn't it be lovely if every child were placed in a reader according to his ability? Of course it would be, and our goal is to help teachers find the appropriate material for each child. Certainly, at this point, we cannot prepare all teachers in reading diagnostic methods, but we can inform them of the simple preparation and use of an Informal Reading Inventory (I.R.I.), which can be just as useful as a formal, standardized, oral reading test.

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The Informal Reading Inventory is a test built upon a graded reading series, preferably the one that the school uses. Thus an I.R.I. written with a basal series (Scott, Foresman, Ginn, etc.) would appropriately give a grade level reader placement for a child in that series. Reading teachers may find it useful to make an I.R.I. on a supplementary series, (Cowboy Sam, Reader's Digest, Etc.) for accurate placement in that series.

Upon completion of the I.R.I. the teacher will have a record of the child's ability to orally read the various texts. If a comprehension score is desired, a second set of paragraphs (for silent reading) with questions, may be written. This set may also be used for post-testing.

BUILDING PHILOSOPHY

Informal Reading Inventories generally follow one pattern of construction. They recommend taking a random selection of 30-300 words from each reader in the series. These are then presented to the child for oral reading. This method tends to be less accurate than the method here described, because, in an arbitrarily chosen selection, one may only encounter five or six new grade level words. Chances are the child may know those few, pass the selection and be placed in a reader above his level. By composing a paragraph of a larger sampling of the new words used in the reader, the examiner will be better able to judge the child's proficiency in that level reader.

One may retort that if the goal is just to be able to read the words in a text, why not have the child read the words at the end of each book. There is a difference, however, between being able to identify words by sight in a list and being able to read them in context. The more significant of the two, is reading in context, for this is the most natural situation in which children encounter words.

USING THE INFORMAL READING INVENTORY

Although the teacher must take time away from her regular reading program to administer the I.R.I., it is well worth it.

One use of an I.R.I. is that of placement. Kender (2) supports this: "passages used in a test aimed at determining placement of pupils for instructional purposes should be taken from reading materials in which the pupil is going to be instructed." (p. 340) After having given this individual test to each pupil, the teacher will know in which book the child should begin the school year; thus making sure he is off to a good start, appropriately placed in a book that will not present frustration to him. This is a wise thing to do, even upon entering the first grade. At that time the teacher may give the pre-primer (PP) tests so that she could avoid having precocious children read all the PP books unnecessarily.

The test may also be administered at the completion of each book to see if the child has mastered the vocabulary. Too many errors denote the need for additional help before progressing to the following text. However, if the child does well, the teacher

can begin the next level of instruction with confidence. For example, in beginning first grade, the I.R.I. for mastery would be used this way: when a child has finished the first pre-primer the teacher would give the first PP test to see if the child can read all the words in context. When the teacher has tested all the children, she may progress to the second PP with those who have mastered the previous vocabulary. For those who missed words, review can be given in small groups. This is a splendid way of teaching diagnostically. It insures that each child is at his level, rather than allowing him to progress to a more unknown vocabulary, thereby compounding the problem. The same procedure may be followed throughout the grades (i.e. giving a test at the end of each book, as a form of evaluating mastery.

Testing for mastery at the end of each book (or section) is an important thing to do, for basals are continually introducing new words. If the child does not know the vocabulary in one book and is confronted with another text, he will be spending his efforts on not only learning the new words, but also relearning old words. On the other hand, if the I.R.I. reveals that the child has not mastered the vocabulary, the teacher may aid the child at that point, before continuing with the next reader.

COMPOSING THE TEST. Rather than choosing an arbitrary page from which children read, the examiner will write his own selection, using the new vocabulary as listed in the back of the test. Attention must be given to the location of the portion of the book from which the selected words are chosen. To be used most effective, as

many words as possible should be chosen from the end of the book. Then when the child has completed the book, he may be given the selection to read. If it is done well, he may be placed in the next level. On the other hand, as a placement device, the selection composed of vocabulary near the end of a book, offers a more accurate evaluation of a child's ability to read material at that grade level.

Often a set number of words is recommended for each selection to be read (e.g. 50-100). This practice is satisfactory for all but the PP level. It is difficult to follow at the pre-primer level due to the limited vocabulary. Therefore, selections for this level should include all the vocabulary presented (the use of a picture with the PP selections may not only be necessary, but also useful). After that, the selections may be written with increasing length, so that the longest (at sixth grade) would be approximately 100 words. The suggested number of words which may be used in the selections are as follows.

TABLE 1

Suggested Number of Words to be Used at each Grade Level for an Informal Reading Inventory

Level	Number of Words (Approximately)
Pre-primer	all in books
Primer	50
First Reader	50
Second	75
Third	75
Fourth	100
Fifth	100
Sixth	100

Since the primer and first readers generally progress quite rapidly in vocabulary, it is a good idea to have two selections for each of

these levels - one near the middle and one near the end. This more frequent testing also enables the teacher to keep in close contact with the child's progress and plan his program with appropriate individualization.

One test for each of the second and third readers (2^1, 2^2, 3^1, 3^2) is sufficient. Several basal series have only one reader for grades four, five, and six. In this case it would be well also, to have two selections - one written with vocabulary near the middle of the book, and one with vocabulary from the end.

When writing the selection it is advisable to choose as many new words as possible from the text and incorporate them into one paragraph. One should not use the vocabulary in the given textual order, but rather choose words from a variety of stories that will fit into one newly written selection. Most often it is possible to use a goodly number in one paragraph, but if it cannot be done, two or three short paragraphs may be used, with the examiner first telling the child that there are several stories not related.

Thus, to write a selection, first choose the vocabulary from the text (words from either the middle or end of the new word list); second, write an original story using those words, preferably in one selection.

MARKING THE TEST. As the child reads each selection the administrator records the errors that are made. Several arbitrary marks are used for noting these errors. The following were considered in marking the present I.R.I.

TABLE 2

Marking System for Informal Reading Inventory

ERROR	MARKING SYMBOL
Substitution	want
Omission	went
Insertion	^
Aid (after 5 sec.)	went
Following not counted as	errors, but noted:
Word by word reading	w-b-w
Finger pointing	f.p.
Hesitation	(one for each sec.)
Repetition	(under each word)

These symbols help the teacher to recall the specific type of error made. Program planning can therefore be more specific for each child.

SCORING THE TEST. After each selection has been read and marked, the teacher counts the number of errors, then transforms them into a percentage of the total number of words per selection. Ninety-eight percent accuracy or above, indicates the child is able to handle the material independently. The instructional level would be the point at which the child achieves accuracy. A score below 95% would be the child's frustration level.

TABLE 3

Score Needed to be Placed at the Independent Instructional, or Frustration Reading Level

Independent (Reads well)	Instructional	Frustration (Material too difficult)
98 - 100%	95 - 97%	below 95%

Since the selections written often vary in the number of words used, it is wise to make a table for each one indicating the number of errors for each level. Placed at the end of the selection, on the teachers copy, percentages for independent, instructional and frus-

tration level can then be referred to readily.

FORMAT OF TEST. The typing and spacing format is similar to other I.R.I.'s. The child's copy of the I.R.I. is typed with each grade level selection on a separate sheet. Typing suggestions are as follows:

PP,P,1,	double space	primary type
2^1, 2^2,	single space	primary type
3^1, 3^2, 4	double space	pica type
5, 6	single space	pica type

These recommendations are to stimulate the size print and spacing used in the basal texts.

For economy purposes, the teacher's copy may contain several selections on one sheet. Each one should be regular type, but double spaced (for marking ease).

FIELD STUDY WITH INFORMAL READING INVENTORY

COMPARISON OF NEW WORDS. A well known basal reading series was used as a basis for the Informal Reading Inventory suggested by the author (°I.R.I.). To see if an I.R.I. as proposed was really necessary, random pages from each reader were chosen, as might be done in the traditional manner of informal testing. Table 4 notes the number of new grade level words that are presented on these pages. First the grade level is presented. If the grade level had only one text, as fifth, a selection from the middle of the text was also chosen and designated 5^1, the end selection was noted 5^2. Next the total number of words counted to get the noted number of new words is recorded. The third column notes the number

of new words that were found.

TABLE 4

Comparison of Total Number of Words and Number of Grade Level Words by Each Method

	Text I.R.I.		°I.R.I.	
	Total Words Selection	New Grade Level Words	Total Words in Selection	New Grade Level Words
PP-1	20	8	20	18
PP-2	35	13	51	23
PP-3	69	6	38	13
Mid. 1	49	14	48	23
End 1	58	14	50	22
2-1	93	14	75	25
2-2	87	12	75	22
3-1	134	16	75	22
3-2	130	7	75	17
4-1	141	11	74	20
4-2	153	11	100	20
5-1	176	8	100	20
5-2	110	3	100	24
6-1	160	6	97	28
6-2	145	7	80	20

As we note the number of new words, we see that, as proposed earlier, a random page selection may contain as few as two new grade level words. Even if the child missed those words, it might be claimed that this was the child's independent level, when in reality, if more grade level words had appeared on the page, the child might have missed more, denoting this as his instructional level.

Since the idea of an I.R.I. is to place the child in his reader, the traditional method may be misleading. Therefore, by composing a paragraph of as many new text words as possible, we will be doing what we want to do - finding out if the child can handle the vocabulary in that text.

Table 4 also shows the number of new words that were used in an original paragraph for the °I.R.I., as well as the total number of

words in that paragraph.

Looking at the table we see that a random page from the 3^2 reader contained 130 words, 7 of those being new. An original paragraph written using new words from the text was able to use 17 new words in a paragraph of 75 words. Thus we can say the latter would give a more accurate placement for the child in that text (as well as giving a more useful vocabulary mastery score).

ADMINISTRATION OF °I.R.I. As indicated in Table 4, a paragraph was written for each of the designated levels. The paragraphs were administered to ten second graders and ten fourth graders. Each group contained three children from the teacher's slow group, four from her middle group, and three from her top group.

First the children were given the Gray Oral Reading Test (1) so that a comparison could be made between its placement and that of an Informal Reading Inventory based on the text. Following that the children were administered the text I.R.I. based on traditional random page selection. Finally they read from the °I.R.I.

NUMBER OF SELECTIONS READ. When comparing the number of selections read with each I.R.I. it was found that fewer were necessary using the "I.R.I. This, of course, would mean a total reduction of time for the teacher in administering it to her entire class.

TABLE 5
Comparison of the Number of Selections Read with the Text I.R.I. and the °I.R.I.

	Second Grade		Fourth Grade	
	Average	Range	Average	Range
Text I.R.I.	4.6	4-6	6.2	5-10
°I.R.I.	3.9	3-5	4.7	3-7

At each grade level, not only the average number of selections read was fewer, but also the number range of selections was smaller with the °I.R.I. Of the twenty children, 13 read more paragraphs when using the book I.R.I.; six read the same number with each method; only in one case was a fewer number read with the text I.R.I.

INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL COMPARISON. When comparing the instructional level of the °I.R.I. with the traditional, we find that in 10 cases (one-half of the total) the book indicated a higher level. This was due to the fact that the book selection gave fewer grade level words. The same instructional level was found in five cases.

In the cases where the book score was lower, it was by one selection; with four of the five cases being children in the middle group. The ten cases in which the book rating was higher, ranged from one selection to four, with the average being 2.5 above the °I.R.I. placement.

A comparison of the Gray score with those of each I.R.I. was also made. In the majority of cases the Gray gave higher reading score than the I.R.I.'s. It gave a higher rating than the text I.R.I. fifteen times, and a higher rating than the °I.R.I. nineteen times.

TABLE 6

Comparison of the Number of Times the Gray Oral Reading Score Equaled the Instructional Level as Found by the Text I.R.I. and the °I.R.I.

	Gray Score Comparison Rating		
	Below Instruc.	Instruc.	Above Instruc.
Text...Grade 2	2	2	6
Text...Grade 4	0	1	9
°I.R.I. Grade 2	0	1	9
°I.R.I. Grade 4	0	0	10

These results indicate that if the teacher places a child in a reader based on the Gray score, he may be reading material at his frustration level rather than his instructional level.

SUMMARY

The idea of informal reading inventories for placing children in their basal texts, is a sound one. Traditional I.R.I.'s, however, based on random selection of passages from texts, tend to give inaccurate placements for children. This happens because the text pages do not always contain enough new words to sample the child's ability to handle that grade level's vocabulary. Therefore, a new method of devising an I.R.I. is suggested. By taking new words from the text and incorporating them into an original paragraph, one would have a truer indication of the child's ability to read the text.

To discover the usefulness of this procedure, a traditional I.R.I. and one based on the new method were administered to ten second graders and ten fourth graders. The Gray Oral Reading Test was also given to the children.

The results indicate that.

(1) the new I.R.I. presented fewer total number of words per selection, with more new words in each.

(2) the new I.R.I. required fewer selections to be read

(3) the new I.R.I. gave an instructional level score in ten cases lower than the traditional I.R.I. - which is at least partially due to the fact that the latter contains fewer mew words

(4) the new I.R.I. as well as the traditional, give lower instructional scores than the Gray

The new I.R.I. holds promise of being a useful instrument. The overwhelming question that remains, involves the accuracy of the placement. This issue remains for further investigation. However, considering the accuracy of any measure, this I.R.I. presents possibilities lacking in the other instruments.

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